

Decision Time
Mark 1: 16-20, 8: 31-38
First Presbyterian Church
Ann Arbor, Michigan
June 5, 2016

The late Yogi Berra, Hall of Fame catcher for the New York Yankees, was famous not only for his skill on the baseball diamond, but for his priceless maxims/proverbs.....he regularly uttered. Among the best, most priceless, was: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." It is reminiscent of the most beloved American poem, Robert Frost's The Road Not Taken.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both,
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.....

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Sometimes you have to make a decision: this way or that way. Decision Time: to go to college or join the Marines, find a job or decide not to decide just now, hang for a while. The decision of which college to attend - which used to be relatively simple -(some of us applied to one college and decided to attend without ever having laid eyes on it!). The whole process has become progressively more complicated for my children and now my grandchildren: multiple applications - and fees, trips to visit, interviews -occurring over a period of several years. It is a huge decision and will determine much of what follows over the rest of life. Important, but not quite as important as the decision about the person I choose to spend the rest of my life with: the one to whom I am willing to say: "All I am and all I ever will be, all I have and ever will have, I commit to you." Every time I stood in front of a couple and led them through their vows, the enormity of what they were deciding took my breath away - and still does.

In every life there come times when important decisions must be made, and when they are made the tectonic plates of your life shift and nothing is ever the same again.

And in every life comes a time when we all make a decision, deeply personal and spiritual, about what we will live for, what to follow and give ourselves to, what, if necessary, to be willing to die for. We all make that decision, perhaps unconsciously, but we make it over and over, every day of our lives.

David Foster Wallace was a very distinguished thinker and writer. Wallace took his own life after a lifelong struggle with mental illness, but before he died he delivered a remarkable commencement address at Kenyon College. "There is no such thing as atheism" he said, "no such thing as not worshipping. The only choice we get is what to worship." He warned the graduates to be careful and thoughtful about what they choose to worship. "If you worship money and things there will never be enough. If you choose to worship beauty and sexual allure, when time and age start showing you will die a million deaths. Worship power and you feel weak and afraid...and you will need ever more power to keep your fears at bay. Worship your intellect and you will end up feeling stupid, always on the edge of being found out."

He warned the Kenyon graduates that "You can slip into this kind of worship little by little, day by day - or you can choose something to worship, to give your life to, to sacrifice for, to live and die for something else, something good and authentic and important. It's up to you. You get to decide." (See MEM, Context, February, 2009)

David Brooks recent book, *The Road to Character*, is a fascinating study of how individuals in our own history, from St. Augustine to Francis Perkins and A Philip Randolph, to Dwight Eisenhower, developed character values that enable them to live fully and meaningfully and lead brilliantly. I was particularly taken by the chapter on George Catlett Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army during World War II and the Secretary of State for whom the Marshall Plan which helped rebuild Europe after the war is named. Marshall was a modest man. His deepest, formative value was a commitment, actually a covenant, he said, to institutions - the Army, the priesthood, the fields of science, or farming, or the law, or education - "that were embedded in the ground before you were born and will be here after you die." (P 114-115)

Decision time came for two young men long ago, standing knee deep in the waters of the Sea of Galilee, casting a fishing net. Another young man, walking along the shore, stopped to watch. When they noticed him, looked up and their eyes met, he said the most peculiar thing: "Follow me". And for whatever reason that is what they did, dropped their nets and followed. There are three of them: Jesus,

Simon Peter and his brother, Andrew. They came upon two more men fishing, James and John, sitting in a boat with their father, mending their nets. "Follow me" and they stepped out of the boat and followed.

There is no explanation. Some have suggested that they must have known Jesus, had been thinking about his teaching and pondering their own lives, where they were headed or not headed. All Mark tells us is that when Jesus showed up it was decision time for them. He didn't tell them where they were going, no career path with measurable goals and metrics and expected outcomes. Just "Follow me" and they made a decision to follow.

The way Mark tells it a similar moment happens in the middle of the story. Decision time. Now there are twelve of them - at least twelve. There is reason to believe that there were several women following Jesus as well, but in that time and place women's were not counted. They had been following him through the rolling hills and villages of Galilee, watching and listening as he taught in the synagogues. They watched in amazement as crowds gathered wherever he went, bringing their sick and elderly and their babies for his blessing, his touch. They watched as he healed and said things they had never heard before: "love your enemies, do good to, those who hurt you, forgive those who offend you, love one another." They listened as everywhere he said: "The kingdom of God is here, now, in your midst, small, sometimes invisible, like leaven in bread. It is here in acts of kindness and compassion and justice and love." And they must have asked themselves: "Who is he? Where are we going?"

In the middle of the story he answers both of those questions and, I think, gives them the opportunity to drop out and go back to their fishing boats and nets. Decision time again. "Who do people say that I am?" he asks. "Some think you are John the Baptist. Others think you are Elijah or one of the ancient prophets." .."But you, who do you say that I am?" Simon - Jesus has been calling him Peter, the Rock, blurts out an astonishing affirmation: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

"What you have said is true, Peter. And in order for me to be the Messiah I must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die.""God forbid, Lord" Peter says and Peter is right. The Messiah doesn't suffer and die. Everyone knows that God's Messiah will rally the people, organize an insurrection, rally the hundreds, maybe thousands, of radically patriotic Zealots hiding in the hills, drive out the hated Romans and put the Messiah where he belongs - on the throne of David.

"Get behind me, Peter. Stop talking and listen." Sweeping his

eyes over them, looking at each one, he says, "If you want to follow me, deny yourself, take up your cross and come along. If you want to save your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life, for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, you will find it." It's for you to decide.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer thought about this very matter in the 1930's as the Nazi party began to assume control in Germany and began to persecute Jews and prepare for war. Bonhoeffer was a pastor and a theologian, a scholar and a pacifist. He wrote one of the most influential books of the 20th Century, *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he defines Christian Faith, not as giving intellectual assent to a list of doctrines. That is how many of us define Christianity - as a set of ideas about God and Jesus, which to understand and affirm makes one a Christian. "That's not it at all", Bonhoeffer wrote. In fact that is much too easy. It's "Cheap grace." Bonhoeffer concluded and wrote that Christian Faith is the act of radical, personal obedience to Jesus Christ, and it happens in the world, not just in the safe comfort of the church. Faith for Bonhoeffer meant living life in the world as Christ's man or woman, holding nothing back. It was his definition of faith, and his own personal commitment to follow Jesus Christ in the world, his world - the world of antisemitism and militarism and political oppression, that led him to join the resistance and participate in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. The plot failed. In *The Cost of Discipleship* he had written, "When Christ calls a man, he calls him to come and die." Along with his fellow conspirators he was arrested and executed in April 1945, just days before the war ended.

Jesus said, "If you wish to save your life you will lose it. If you lose your life for my sake, you will find it."

The call to follow happens, for most of us, far less dramatically than Bonhoeffer's, thanks be to God. I've always loved the way New Testament scholar, Lamar Williamson put it - because I have seen it in my own experience. "The woman who devotes her life to raising children who need a home, a man whose devotion to a mentally ill wife is quiet and steady, the youth whose civil disobedience for conscience sake leads to prison or exile - there are countless thousands who, through the centuries and many varying contexts, have interpreted this text with their lives." (Interpretation, Mark)

I served on the Board of Directors of the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, and chaired the Board for a term. It was fascinating. We met several times a year, and one of our responsibilities was to hear the Acquisitions report - books that are in the planning and early writing stages and will be published and go on the market in a year or two. One of our big projects was a theological

commentary on the Bible, a wonderful contribution to biblical scholarship and a valuable resource for preachers looking for fresh insights on familiar texts. The editor in charge of the whole project told us that a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, John Goldingay, had been commissioned to write 17 volumes on the Old Testament. 17 volumes! Now, biblical commentaries are generally big, hefty, books, doorstop books. Professor Goldingay had agreed to write 17. Attempting a little irreverent humor I said, "Well, I hope he's a young man!" Board members chuckled knowingly. But then the editor in charge said: "Actually he's not young at all. He's around 70. His wife suffers from advanced multiple sclerosis. Professor Goldingay takes care of her himself, all day every day. He doesn't travel any longer, doesn't accept speaking engagements, doesn't even attend scholarly conferences - which scholars love to do. He stayed with her every day, all day, cares for his wife and writes books.

One day Jesus forever redefined what it means to be faithful, to be a Christian, to follow Jesus Christ as his woman, man, young person. "Follow me" he said. "Take up your cross and follow.... If you want to save your life you will end up losing it. But if you lose your life - if you find a way to give your life away to something good and just and important and loving - you will find your life. In giving your life away you will be fully, completely, vitally alive.

There is, quite simply, nothing more important for any one of us, regardless of who we are and what we are doing vocationally or how old we are, than finding something to give our life to: our time, our energy, imagination, our love, our resources. It really is, in the final analysis, a matter of life or death.

I am one of those poor souls, mostly my age, who never learned to type properly. And I have been fortunate all my life to have people do my typing for me. It's really rather pathetic. Since retirement I'm on my own. I have to do my own typing. I'm slow and not very accurate. I make a lot of mistakes and spend a lot of time going back and correcting them. One mistake I make all the time always causes me to pause for a second and smile. As you know the "l" and the "o" live beside each other on the keyboard. The result is that when I intend to write "live" it often comes out "love". And when I mean to type "love" it comes out "live." It's almost as if there is a mysterious dynamic going on, a transcendent, eternal truth, emerging out of my typing mistakes: live - love: love - live.

Jesus said:

"Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Amen